



WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Copenhagen
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**Attacking
Poverty**

**Building
Solidarity**

**Creating
Jobs**



UNITED NATIONS

Children Are Our Future

The Situation

In confronting poverty, unemployment, population growth and urbanization, and widespread instability and conflicts, the world needs to remember the enormous potential that exists for human progress. Revolutions in industry and production — reflected in a global economic output valued at more than US\$20 trillion — make it possible to bring the benefits of progress to everybody and help to solve our major social challenges.

The child, a Chilean poet once wrote, cannot wait. This means that of all the social challenges, children's needs are the most pressing. Luckily, the world has the financial, technical and organizational resources to provide for all its children.

It also has a compelling reason to do so: at the 1990 World Summit for Children, where the global focus on human development received a major boost, world leaders committed their countries to achieving crucial goals for child survival, protection and development. Keeping those commitments will lay the foundation for progress in social development, ensuring a healthier and better educated, and thus more productive, citizenry, into the next century.

As United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said, "Of all the subjects of development, none has the acceptance, or the power to mobilize, as does the cause of children. Our children are our future".

Children are a gauge of progress — and lack of it — their lives highly sensitive barometers of social distress and of the impact of poverty, unemployment, dislocations of rapid urbanization, and conflict.

♦ Each year 13 million children under five worldwide still die from easily preventable diseases and malnutrition.

♦ There are nearly 200 million moderately to severely malnourished children under five in developing countries — 36 per cent of all

children in this age group. Some 69 million are severely malnourished.

♦ In developing countries, 130 million children, almost two thirds of them girls, lack access to primary education.

"In a world where we now talk about gross domestic product of tens of billions of dollars", observed James P. Grant, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "to have children deprived of basic education, health care and minimal amounts of food is increasingly obscene. Morality must change with capacity."

Some impressive gains have been made for children in developing countries, saving an estimated 20 million young lives in the last decade and improving the quality of life for an additional 100 million children.

In little more than one generation, child death rates have been more than halved; malnutrition rates have been reduced by about 30 per cent; and the proportion of children enrolled in primary school has risen from less than half to more than three quarters.

The Approach

A transformation is under way in the world's treatment of children. The new ethic is reflected in the broad spectrum of rights guaranteed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, and the goals set at the World Summit for Children in 1990.

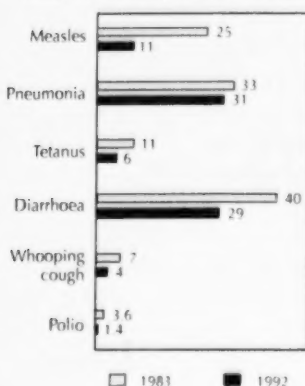
Now ratified by more than 150 countries and close to becoming the world's first truly global human rights law, the Convention transforms children's basic needs into legal rights. The Convention's 54 articles commit countries to guarantee children's rights to:

♦ Survival, development and protection from abuse, neglect and economic or sexual exploitation;

♦ The highest attainable standard of health care;

Decreasing deaths from childhood diseases

(Under-five mortality rates in 100,000s)



Note: 1983 figures do not include China.
Source: World Health Organization, 1993.

- ◆ Free and compulsory primary education;
- ◆ Assistance for families to achieve an adequate standard of living;
- ◆ Freedom of thought, conscience, religion, association and expression.

Almost all countries support the World Summit for Children's 7 major and 20 supporting goals for children and women, as they constitute the best social development investment a society can make. Progress towards the goals lays the foundation for alleviating poverty and unemployment, improving gender equality, slowing population growth, protecting the environment, and instituting sustainable social development.

These goals for the year 2000 were also endorsed by the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Earth Summit). Achieving them can save 30 million children's lives during this decade.

Already, 9 out of 10 children in the world live in countries that have national programmes of action in the following key areas:

Universal child immunization — Fifteen years ago, the benefits of immunization were restricted to 15 per cent of the developing world's children. Today, immunization reaches almost 80 per cent of all children, preventing some 3 million child deaths each year. The challenge is to broaden coverage to save the 2 million children a year who die because they are not immunized against measles, polio, tuberculosis, diphtheria, pertussis (whooping cough) and tetanus.

Oral rehydration therapy — Dehydration from diarrhoeal disease is still a major child-killer, despite gains in promoting oral rehydration therapy (ORT)—a low-cost treatment that families provide at home and that can prevent 90 per cent of these deaths.

Worldwide, less than 1 per cent of diarrhoeal disease cases were treated with ORT in 1980; the usage had increased to approximately 40 per cent in 1993, preventing more than 1 million child deaths. But more than 3 million children under five years of age still die each year from diarrhoeal dehydration.

Nutrition — Children require access to adequate food as well as the prevention and control of disease and improved care and feeding of young children in the family and community

environment. Malnutrition, implicated in 30 to 40 per cent of under-five deaths from preventable illnesses in developing countries, damages children's physical growth, impairs cognitive development and learning abilities, and compromises countries' long-term social development efforts.

A mildly malnourished child has twice the risk of dying from common childhood diseases as an adequately nourished child. A moderately malnourished child's mortality risk triples, and for a severely malnourished child the risk of death is 10 times as great.

Breast-feeding — This is the cornerstone of infant health and nutrition, yet it is an endangered practice around the world. Exclusive breast-feeding of infants during their first four to six months of life could prevent more than 1 million infant deaths each year.

A bottle-fed baby in a poor community is 15 times more likely to die from diarrhoeal disease and 4 times more likely to die of pneumonia than an exclusively breast-fed baby.

Micronutrient deficiencies — "Hidden hunger", a lack of essential micronutrients in the diet, has devastating effects on physical and mental development. More than 2 billion people, mostly women and children in developing countries, are deficient in one or more micronutrients, risking impaired health, disability and death.

◆ **Iodine deficiency disorders (IDD)** that affect 1.5 billion people would virtually disappear if the world achieves universal salt iodization by the end of 1995. Due to IDD, each year 120,000 children are born with severe mental and physical retardation, known as cretinism; 20 million children suffer less severe retardation and 50 million children are unable to take full advantage of primary schooling.

◆ **Vitamin A deficiency** affects some 40 million children worldwide, causing blindness in 250,000 children each year. By increasing the severity and risk of childhood diseases, vitamin A deficiency contributes to the deaths of more than 1 million under-fives annually. Countries are eliminating vitamin A deficiency by supplying supplements, encouraging breast-feeding, consumption of vitamin A-rich foods, and, in some countries, fortifying foods with vitamin A.

♦ **Iron deficiency** affects over 1 billion people, and 50 per cent of all iron deficiency occurs among pregnant women and preschool-age children. Iron-deficiency anaemia is partially associated with 50 per cent—and wholly responsible for 20 per cent—of all maternal deaths. Improved diet, food fortification and low-cost supplements all prevent the problem.

Education—Access to primary education for all children is essential for social development.

Approximately 500 million children in developing countries start primary school each year; however, more than 100 million of them, two thirds of whom are girls, drop out before finishing four years of primary school.

Disparities between budget allocations favouring secondary and college education at the expense of primary school education must be narrowed to revitalize primary education, and other approaches need to be created to reach children not served by the formal primary school system.

Girls—Treated unfairly in virtually every society and culture, girls endure one of the world's most pervasive yet least acknowledged forms of discrimination. This "apartheid of gender" affects a girl's and woman's entire life-span, impeding social progress and perpetuating injustices and inequalities that cripple individuals and whole societies.

In South Asia, North Africa, the Middle East and China, there are 100 million fewer women than could be expected from demographic trends. Extreme forms of discrimination include female infanticide, sex-selective abortions and severe neglect.

In at least 25 countries, mainly in Africa, an estimated 2 million girls each year undergo some form of genital mutilation, which inflicts severe pain and trauma, causes medical complications that can be fatal, and permanently damages the genital organs and normal body functions.

Other Priorities

Child labour—While unemployment is a global problem, increasing numbers of children in developing countries—estimated at 200 million—work for their own and their families' survival, often in dangerous and exploitative conditions.

Asia has some of the highest numbers of working children, accounting for up to 11 per cent of the labour force in some South Asian countries.

Focus on Africa—African countries have struggled to improve child health and education, more than doubling immunization coverage in a number of countries since 1985 and lifting primary school enrolment levels from 46 per cent in 1970 to 68 per cent in 1990. But Africa's economic crisis, the growing burden of debt, natural disasters, and the persistence of many brutal armed conflicts threaten these gains.

About 220 million people—half the population of sub-Saharan Africa—live in poverty, unable to meet their basic needs.

The more than US\$10 billion sub-Saharan African countries pay each year in debt service is three times their expenditures on health.

There is global agreement on the urgent need for both debt relief for Africa and significant assistance for the UN New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s.

AIDS and youth—The AIDS pandemic threatens to reverse many gains achieved in children's health and welfare. Approximately 1 million children are believed to be infected with the virus that causes AIDS, and by 2000 an estimated 10 million children will have been orphaned by the disease.

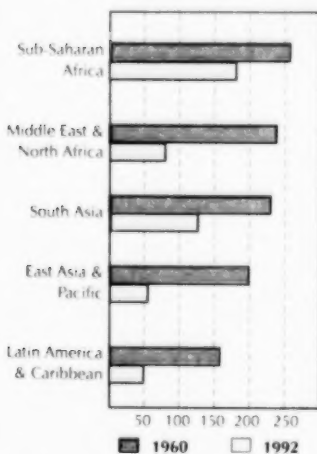
With young people now most at risk of contracting AIDS, the UN system agencies, as well as other committed public/private-sector entities, are assisting countries with education, life-skills training and health services for vulnerable youth.

Armed conflicts—The many armed conflicts around the globe seriously undermine progress already made and threaten future development. The number of refugees worldwide has swelled to 18 million, and another 24 million people are displaced within their own countries.

Children have been the most tragic casualties of armed conflicts during the past decade, with more than 1.5 million killed, more than 4 million wounded or disabled, and some 12 million left homeless. Ten million children are believed to suffer war-related psychological trauma. The estimated 100 million land-mines in 60 countries kill or maim hundreds of children each month.

Reducing child mortality

(Deaths per 1,000 live births)



Source: UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 1994.

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—UN Secretary-General
Boutros Boutros-Ghali

UNICEF has pioneered "days of tranquility" and "corridors of peace" to assist children in war, programmes to help heal psychosocial trauma, and Education for Development programmes that sensitize children against prejudice and teach conflict-resolution skills.

20/20: Mobilizing Resources for the Future

To sustain global commitments to children, UNICEF supports the "20/20" strategy proposed by the UN Development Programme in 1991. At best, the share currently allocated to basic human needs in the budgets of developing countries and by international donors is only about 10 per cent. Under the "20/20" strategy, both developing countries and donors would increase their allocations to 20 per cent, thus

ensuring the greater resources needed to usher in a brighter future for children and all humanity.

For further reading:

The State of the World's Children, UNICEF (annual).

The Progress of Nations, UNICEF (annual).

Girls and Women: A UNICEF Development Priority, UNICEF, 1994.

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